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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NOUAKCHOTT 000334

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DEPT FOR D, AF A/S FRAZER AND AF/W
NSC FOR AF MR. PITTMAN
CDR USEUCOM FOR DCDR GEN WARD
ADDIS ABABA ALSO FOR USAU

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MR

SUBJECT: MAURITANIA SCENESETTER FOR PRESIDENTIAL DELEGATION
ATTENDING THE APRIL 19 INAUGURATION

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 294
[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 295
[1](#)C. NOUAKCHOTT 303
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[1](#)E. NOUAKCHOTT 310

Classified By: CDA Steven C. Koutsis. Reasons: 1.4 (b),(d)

[1](#)1. (C) After almost 30 years of military rule, Mauritania's first credibly elected president since independence will be sworn in on April 19. The U.S., in cooperation with its international partners and the Mauritanian transitional government, worked actively to bring about this historic transition. While celebrations are in order, Mauritania, which straddles West Africa and the Arab World, faces many challenges, and our efforts to ensure long-term democratic success have only just begun.

-- THE CHALLENGES AHEAD --

[1](#)2. (C) When Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi takes power on April 19, he will begin a new era for Mauritania, and if he acts wisely and decisively, he will make Mauritania a model for the region and perhaps for the Arab World and Africa. But this may be a lot to ask from this humble, intellectual politician, who is anywhere from 68-71 years old, and rumored to be in frail health (although he looks fit enough to us). He knows that two years of a democratic transition have heightened people's hopes, and he must now work to manage these expectations. He knows his first task is to form a government that will not only be at least as competent as the previous transitional government, but also satisfy his supporters and pass muster with a freely elected parliament made up of several parties and Independent deputies. Gone are the days of a Parliament dominated by the state party. Abdallahi was able to cobble together a Parliamentary majority through his "Mithaq" coalition during the election, but it remains to be seen if the Parliament will take on a truly independent role in government.

A History of Military Control

[1](#)3. (C) The military should be applauded for turning over power peacefully to a civilian government. This accomplishment is in great part linked to the character of outgoing Military Council for Justice and Democracy (CMJD)

President Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall. Vall has said he will retire. The rest of the CMJD members, however, will stay on in their functions at the pleasure of the new president. While it appears likely that the military will give the new government some time to prove itself, President-elect Abdallahi will need to manage carefully the civil-military relationship. He must ensure that proper equipment and training are provided for his envisioned republican army, while making sure the officers' personal interests are protected. The officer corps is widely believed to be suffering from infighting among its key members. CMJD members were reportedly divided along party lines, with some having supported second place finisher Ahmed Ould Daddah, and others having backed President-elect Abdallahi. It is feared that those officers who supported Daddah will resent the newfound influence of those who supported Abdellahi. While these rivalries do not pose a substantial risk in the short-term, Abdallahi is well aware of the long-term potential for conflict.

Ethnic Tensions

14. (C) Ethnic and racial tensions are palpable in Mauritania. White Moors (Arab-Berber) control the lion's share of the country's wealth and power; Black Moors (Arabized black Africans) profit from their close relationship with the White Moors; and Afro-Mauritanians (Black Africans who have kept their sub-Saharan languages and cultures), compete for the leftovers. Afro-Mauritanian resistance to Moor dominance in the 1970s and 80s occasionally flared up into violence, most notably in 1989, when hundreds of Afro-Mauritanians were killed, and tens of thousands forced to flee to Senegal and Mali. These "89 Events" left residual tensions that have never been resolved, and an estimated 20,000 - 30,000

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Afro-Mauritanian refugee are still living in Senegal and Mali.

Trafficking in Persons

15. (C) Mauritania is both a source and destination for people trafficked for forced labor, with slavery-related practices, and possibly slavery itself, persisting in rural and urban areas. Slavery was traditionally practiced between White and Black Moors (with the former exploiting the later), however, the practice has also existed within the Afro-Mauritanian ethnic groups. Regardless of its label, this largely poverty-induced exploitation tears at Mauritania's social fabric, and exacerbates already tense inter-ethnic relations.

Corruption and the Economy

16. (C) Overcoming rampant corruption is perhaps Mauritania's largest economic and development challenge. While the transitional government made significant progress in making its finances more transparent in order to benefit from debt cancellation under MDRI, institutional corruption permeates both the private and public sectors. Mauritania remains one of the world's poorest countries, with high rates of illiteracy and unemployment (particularly among the rapidly expanding youth population), a weak public education system, feeble social services, and a lack of water for drinking and irrigation. While oil production remains a positive economic factor, original hopes for the discovery of vast oil reserves are still unrealized. The one functioning field is not producing as expected, and no other fields are being exploited at this time. While ongoing mineral exploration efforts show promise, it appears clear that the extractive sector will not generate sufficient funds to cure Mauritania's economic woes single-handedly. At the same time the government has already begun spending based on false revenue estimates, such as taking out new loans and providing pay raises to its bloated civil service.

Islamism

¶17. (C) While the vast majority of Mauritania's Islamists are moderate, even having participated in the democratic transition, Islamic extremists continue to operate here. Former President Taya was successful in countering these extremist elements, often through harsh and extrajudicial means. However, with a new government coming to power, extremists may well be looking to test the waters.

Terrorism

¶18. (C) Mauritania has been the target of several plots by the Al-Qaida Organization in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) starting in June 2005 when an isolated military outpost in northern Mauritania was attacked by AQIM (then known as GSPC) elements. Unlike Mali and Senegal, which tolerate the presence of AQIM operatives in their territory, Mauritania has been very pro-active in taking action against AQIM elements in the region, despite limited resources. As a result, Mauritania appears to be a prime target of AQIM planning. Although considered a target, Mauritania has also been used by AQIM for logistical support, as well as fertile recruiting ground. AQIM has recruited dozens of young Mauritaniens to join their ranks and sent them to Mali for terrorist training, and Mauritaniens are the second largest nationality in AQIM after Algerians. In addition, a small number of Mauritaniens have been located among Al-Qaida forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.

----- -- HOW WE CAN HELP -- -----

¶19. (C) With so few democratic success stories in Africa and the Middle East, we cannot afford to let Mauritania's democratic experiment fail. Developing a strong and influential relationship with Mauritania, a country with an almost exclusively Muslim population and a strong partner in the Global War on Terror, is a vital U.S. interest. The new government will be given some time by its people to demonstrate that it is up to the challenge. If it is not, it will be in serious trouble, and the future of this new

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democracy will come into question. We believe the moment is critical for us and other countries with an interest in promoting peace, stability, and democracy, to show our support.

TSCTP

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¶10. (C) Through fully incorporating Mauritania into the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), we can help the Mauritaniens defeat terrorist organizations and diminish their ability to gain recruits, as well as promote good governance and reinforce our bilateral military ties.

Military Cooperation

¶11. (C) Military cooperation will resume with the new government. We are preparing for three JCETs this summer. We intend to engage across normal security lines within OEF-TS. We will build small pockets of excellence within the National Guard, National Gendarmerie and within the Military. This will provide balance within the security services, be cost effective and will not shift the balance of power in the region. We will look to develop a unit in the National Guard, National Police, National Gendarmerie and with the military. We also have two military initiatives under way regarding maritime safety and security that will be supportive in the counter-terrorism and economic arenas. We will recommence training under the State Department's Anti-Terrorist Assistance program and will seek other ways to help.

¶12. (C) Given its cultural make-up, Mauritania is in a unique position to work as peacekeepers in both Sub-Saharan and North Africa. The capabilities of the Mauritanian military are low. However, bringing African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) to Mauritania will assist with professionalizing its military. In addition to increasing capabilities, bringing Mauritania into ACOTA will strengthen its position as a long-term democratic partner in the region. That training, especially with personnel from neighboring countries, will enhance cooperation among the region's security forces, further weakening terrorists' efforts. We should encourage Mauritania's active participation in the AU-led peacekeeping mission in Somalia (AMISOM) as a concrete measure of Mauritania's interest in joining the democratic club of nations.

Democracy Promotion

¶13. (C) The U.S. and its partners worked actively during the transition to bring democracy to Mauritania; ensuring long-term democratic success will require an equal or greater effort. We must focus on strengthening Mauritania's weak democratic institutions such as its newly elected Parliament, the press, civil society, and a responsible political opposition. Efforts to support these key institutions have been underway for many months, but important work remains. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) played a key role, and is currently preparing an important program to train new legislators. NDI's role here will remain essential for the foreseeable future.

Anti-Corruption and Economic Development

¶14. (C) The transitional government made significant anti-corruption and economic achievements during the past two years, and these achievements must be secured and built upon if Mauritania is to continue its integration into the global economy. We must encourage the new government to remain committed to economic and anti-corruption reforms, and to follow through with Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) implementation, establish an appropriate oil revenue management mechanism with IMF and WB support, and pursue prudent monetary and fiscal policies. In addition, with the return of rule of law, Mauritania's eligibility for AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act) benefits should be reinstated. With the return of rule of law and the transitional government's achievements in economic reforms, Mauritania's indices appear to make it competitive for qualification for the Millennium Challenge Account Threshold program. We should encourage Mauritania to enter into the program.

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Return of Refugees and Restitution for 89 Events

¶15. (C) Effectively resolving the lingering issues of Mauritanian refugees and 89 Event victims will be the most effective ways to reduce ethnic tensions and build national unity. President-elect Abdallahi has repeatedly signaled his intention to tackle these issues within his first year in office. We must applaud his intentions and stand ready to assist him in these efforts.

Humanitarian Assistance

¶16. (C) The U.S. must continue to respond to Mauritania's humanitarian needs. Mauritania needs our development projects, humanitarian assistance, and food aid if it is to confront high rates of illiteracy, widespread poverty, pockets of serious malnutrition, and a potential explosion in HIV/AIDS. All these issues have the potential to weaken the new democracy and undermine our efforts to deny terrorists a fertile recruitment ground.

Koutsis